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THE FORGOTTEN FOREST PRODUCT

*Forestry in the New York City Watershed;
Private Lands, Public Benefit*

By Kevin Brazill

across New York's Catskill Mountains and lower Hudson Valley, hardwood forests spread for hundreds of miles on each side of the Hudson River. The woods – owned mostly by private landowners – fuel the local wood-based economy, provide sanctuary to homeowners and wildlife, and supply over 10 million New York City metropolitan residents with clean, unfiltered water. Roughly 1.3 billion gallons of water pours into the city everyday – 90% of it coming from deep reservoirs in the vast Catskill/Delaware watershed, west of the Hudson.

In the early 1990s, the US Environmental Protection Agency mandated that New York and other large American cities filter their water or implement watershed protection measures to ensure a safe drinking water supply. Rather than pouring billions of dollars into building and maintaining a series of filtration plants, the New York City government proposed regulating upstate dairy farms and forestry operations to prevent non-point source pollution – in the forms of cow manure and skidder-drag – from fouling upstate streams.

Those rumors of regulation fueled an already deep resentment among upstate New Yorkers toward the city's government. After all, many upstate towns were displaced – graves exhumed, homes moved, farms eliminated – when reservoirs were built from the latter 1800s through the 1960s. With the prospect of losing their rural lifestyle and economic livelihood fast becoming a reality, farmers and community members came together to fight the city.

After years of conflict, a resolution was reached and in 1993, the not-for-profit Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) incorporated and began using city dollars to develop whole farm plans on regional dairy operations. Since then, the Council has added a conservation easement program and a forestry program to continue implementing voluntary incentives to keep working farms and forests productive and clean.

The WAC Forestry Program

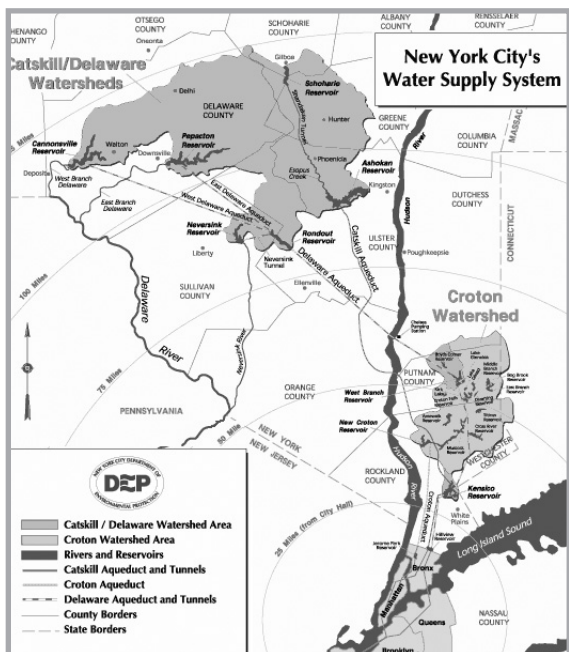
What began in 1997 as a two-person operation charged with helping landowners plan their forests' future has grown into a program that employs six foresters and natural resources professionals. Overseeing the operation is a diverse committee vested in the future of New York forestry. Today, the WAC Forestry Program is a multi-million dollar land planning, forestry education, and economic development initiative that serves as an international model for public-private partnerships.

The WAC Forestry Program receives nearly equal amounts of funding from the New York City Department of Environmental Protection and the USDA Forest Service with priceless technical expertise from both agencies and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. The Forestry Program trains foresters in riparian management and sediment control and then adds them to a select list of "Watershed Qualified Foresters." This elite group can receive funding to write forest management plans for private woodland owners in the New York City watershed. Management

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plans include a host of features to help the landowner become a better steward. Always voluntary, these plans serve as the springboard for landowner and forester involvement in the WAC Forestry Program.

To date, nearly 500 plans have been written by Qualified Foresters covering over 90,000 acres. Once a landowner has an approved plan, funding opportunities to improve forest roads, install timber harvest roads, and implement plan prescriptions are available. The program encourages sustainable timber harvesting for



New York City draws its drinking water, among the cleanest in the nation, from two upstate forested regions: the Catskills and the Croton watersheds.

the following reasons: 1) regular harvests ensure a constant wood supply for the local economy, 2) growing trees absorb nutrients more quickly than decaying trees, thereby reducing nutrient loads in water flowing through forests, 3) many timber harvesting techniques improve wildlife and tree species diversity, and 4) revenue gleaned from timber harvests can help lower property taxes, thereby reducing parcelization and fragmentation of forests.

To bolster the planning and implementation initiatives on private woodlands, the WAC Program also has a strong economic development component that grants dollars to local

wood-based businesses. Since 2000, more than 75 companies have received over \$2 million to retool, hire apprentices, market, expand, and improve safety. These dollars – provided by the USDA Forest Service – help to ensure that markets exist for the wood harvested from watershed woodlands.

Finally, much of the WAC Forestry Program's mission revolves around educating people – landowners, loggers, foresters, students, and government decision-makers – about the benefits of sound forestry and its relationship to clean water. Without landowner buy-in, student bus tours to the reservoirs, and the WAC's three Model Forests the Forestry Program would not be able to meet its goals.

Successes and Challenges

Throughout its first eight years of operation, the WAC Forestry Program has experienced its share of successes and challenges. Success lies primarily with its partner and contracting agencies and Watershed Qualified Foresters who help sell the program to its target audiences. From small not-for-profit groups like the Catskill Forest Association to large universities like the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, NY, reaching landowners, educating loggers, and bringing all the disparate groups together at Model Forest sites has made a difference in changing attitudes toward forestry.

Most of WAC's forestry challenges have come at the urban-rural interface, in the Croton Watershed east of the Hudson River. There, WAC foresters have had to work harder with its partnering agencies to convince people about the value of actively managing timberlands. In October 2003, a proposed Model Forest in Putnam County was fiercely opposed by a small group of local individuals. Since that time, WAC foresters and their partners have worked hard to tailor the project to fit community needs while maintaining the integrity of the Model Forest established to educate and provide space for diverse ecological research. ■



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To learn more about the Watershed Agricultural Council and its many land conservation and economic development programs, visit the website: www.nycwatershed.org. There, visitors can take a virtual tour of the Frost Valley Model Forest, read about the skills of various Watershed Qualified Foresters, find a primary and secondary wood products directory for the region, and learn more about urban kids touring the forests that filter their water.